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ABSTRACT

The generalizability of several variables which have been related to attraction among adults to preschool children was investigated. It was found that perceived physical attractiveness, perceived proximity, and familiarity are all significantly positively correlated with how popular a child is in his nursery school class. (Author)

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Correlates of Attraction among Preschool Children

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One of the most popularly researched areas in social psychology is interpersonal attraction. The focus of a large amount of this literature has been the investigation of correlates of attraction among adults. Recently, the meaningfulness of some of this literature to other populations has been questioned. For example, Levinger and Snoek (1972) contend that, "A persons's needs may change with time and increasing psychological maturity, and thus his readiness for one or another type of intimate relationship. We have hardly begun to understand what kinds of relationships the individual is predisposed to form at various ages, or how his developmentally determined needs will interact with the kind and intensity of attraction he feels." There is a strong implication in this statement that the meaning of attraction and its correlates may differ at various ages. Our interest is in the latter area, that is, in investigating the generalizability of some of the correlates of attraction among adults to preschool children.

A number of studies have examined correlates of attraction among preschoolers. For example, McCandless & Marshall (1957)

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reported a significant relationship between popularity and the amount of observed friendly approach and associative play. Similarly, Moore (1964) found consistent positive correlations between a measure of perceived friendliness and sociometric status. Moore & Updegraff (1964) showed that children observed to be more nurturant (giving affection, attention, and reassurance) were most liked. Two studies (Charlesworth & Hartup, 1966; Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1966) reported that children who were liked tended to use more positive reinforcements. Dion and Berschied (1974) investigated the relationship between physical attractiveness (as measured by adults) and popularity. In general, they found that unattractive children were relatively less popular than attractive ones. Two studies (Haskett, 1971; Langlois, Gottfried, & Seay, 1973) have reported that preschool children are more attracted to similar than opposite sex children.

The purpose of the study to be discussed today was to discover whether some additional variables, variables that are positively correlated with attraction among adults, are similarly related to preschoolers. The three variables which we examined were: proximity (perceived proximity in this case), familiarity, and perceived physical attractiveness. Although there is evidence that adult judgements of a child's attractiveness are positively related to the child's popularity, it has not yet been shown whether children's own judgements of their classmate's physical attractiveness is

related to popularity.

Our subjects were 47 children, 26 boys and 21 girls, with a mean age of 4.5 years (SD = 11 months) who enrolled in three classes of the Child Study Laboratory, a nursery school at the University of Maine at Orono. Popularity was measured by the Picture Sociometric Technique (McCandless & Marshall, 1957). Each child was seated in front of a board on which is mounted a black and white photograph of every child in his class. The subject is asked to identify each child by name and then to find the 3 children he especially likes and the three he does not like. Each child was assigned a total popularity score which was the number of likes he is given minus the number of dislikes. The other measures were obtained as follows:

1. Perceived physical attractiveness - each subject was asked whether the child in each picture was "pretty" or "not pretty". The percent of children in a subject's class rating him as pretty was the perceived attractiveness score for that subject.

2. Perceived proximity - each subject was asked to point to the children who live near him. The percent of children in a subject's class who said they lived near him was the perceived proximity score for that subject.

3. Familiarity - each subject was asked the name of the child in each picture. The percent of children in a subject's class who knew his first name was the familiarity score for that subject.

Results and Discussion

Our measure of popularity seemed to be reliable. Initial testing correlated .73 ($p<.001$) with retesting of most of the subjects several weeks later on the Picture Sociometric Technique. Popularity correlated significantly with perceived attractiveness ($r_s = .57$, $p<.001$), perceived proximity ($r_s = .29$, $p<.03$), and familiarity ($r_s = .44$, $p<.01$). Thus, the more popular children were those who were perceived by the other children as physically attractive, as living closer to them, and with whom they are more familiar. Since these variables have also been shown to correlate among adults, our results suggest that at least some of the correlates of attraction among adults are also correlates of attraction among preschool children.

Further studies in this area which we are conducting concerns the development of correlates of attraction. Although it appears that some of the correlates of attraction among adults also apply to preschoolers, as we have shown, it is our opinion that they may not apply to all children. We are presently investigating the influence cognitive factors play in the development of attraction correlates. Our approach is based on the assumption that social development and social responses are cognitively based, that the cognitive base changes as a result of development, and that attraction like other complex psychological phenomenon has its rrots in the organization of thought. We believe that a variable will be a correlate of attraction only when the

child has developed a cognitive notion of that variable. To illustrate, we might expect that although in general, preschoolers seem to be attracted to those who are more physically attractive or of similar sex, and so forth, it is only those children who have cognitively developed the ideas of physical attractiveness or sex similarity where one will find that these variables correlate with attraction. For those children who do not have certain concepts, these variables should be unrelated to attraction. We are currently working in this area to provide some empirical verification for these ideas.

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